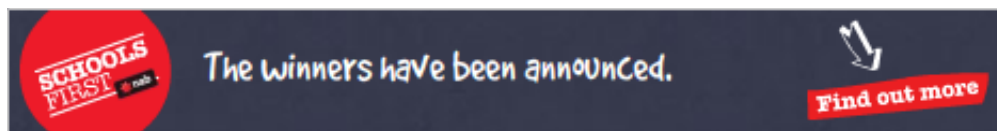




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Year of Wonders

Colleen Keane

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Year of Wonders

author Geraldine
Brooks.

"A Novel of the Plague" is Geraldine Brooks' subtitle for *Year of Wonders* and, like the recent swine flu pandemic, the Great Plague of 1666 ("annus mirabilis") carried off the young before the old in England. Does this novel about the mid-17th century have anything to say that may be allegorical and useful about our present challenges?

Swine flu created panic around the world last year, but the 21st century benefits from scientific advances and forms of containment unknown and unavailable in the 1600s. Brooks' former role as war journalist and foreign correspondent brings a heightened authenticity to the texture of the novel, along with its genesis in historical fact.

Human behaviour has changed in the face of discovery and learning. Formal developments in science and medicine have put to rest much of the irrationality and misunderstanding about illness and its sources, especially moral interpretations equating sickness with sin. Yet some human reactions under intense stress can seem similar to the behaviour associated with past ignorance, and graphically depicted in *Year of Wonders*.

Brooks' novel and its themes give pause for thought and take a double-edged look at these tendencies and capacities. Humans can still resort to destructive irrationality under intense pressure - such as provoked by natural disasters and terrorist attacks - but adaptability and resourcefulness are also strong characteristics of human society and of many individuals. As well, not everything associated with the past is about scientific ignorance - *Year of Wonder* explores ancient (women's) knowledge with respect and represents it with considerable informative detail, along with other material detail of life at the time. Modern medicine, after all, had its source in herbal knowledge and simple forms of healing attention, a point often overlooked in the modern world.

Nature, gender and society

The place of nature in people's lives is a main theme in the novel, alongside moral and emotional questions about human behaviour under pressure. As is evident in the current world, particularly after the earthquake in Haiti, Brooks' insights and eloquent prose convey ideas and concerns that are timeless. A warning

about climate change and the need to respect (appease?) the planet may not be too much of a stretch here either.

The brutality and beauty of nature, its destructiveness and healing capacities and its flows and seasons, form the paradox that lies at the centre of the novel. All life is essentially dual in character, with both good and negative potential. Women, their corporeality regarding sex, birth, caring and the passing on of healing knowledge, are perceived as closer to nature, and therefore more vulnerable at times of great upheaval. In *Year of Wonders* the threatening side of nature erupts at a time of social change: the Restoration of Charles II and the end of the Puritan regime.

Personal roles, character and vocation

Anna Frith's voice is the core: a first-person imaginative account of the year of terror and wonder, of being shut off and quarantined from the wider world by moral choice, and through her eyes we see the events and reactions, both dreadful and edifying. At times Anna seems like a saint in her servant status and the roles she assumes: selfless and profoundly considerate. But she too has moments when she approaches despair, madness and envy. She pilfers the poppy to let her forget and find short-term relief from the pain of losing her children. She lets go of concern for her stepmother Aphra, fearing for her own sanity. And she deeply envies the intimacy and companionship between Mompellion and Elinor.

Like everyone else, Anna is human, and complex. She regrets the nature of her father's death, avenged for his appalling predatory exploitation of the dying, and sees him as undeserving of such a savage end. Her nuanced responses are contrasted with the violently self-seeking behaviour of characters such as Bont and Aphra, and the wealthy and callous Bradfords.

Religion in society

Religion is the other grand and interrelated theme. Religious frameworks and values are influenced, if not generated, by the need to explain human existence and experience in the face of trauma and forces that don't make sense to humans. And in *Year of Wonders* religion dovetails as a theme with moral behaviour and social duty, giving a meaning and substance to challenges that seem profoundly lacking in justice. But the two are not equivalent - moral responses aren't totally dependent on religious commitment. Humanity and humanism have their own values, meanings and rewards.

Brooks' narrative makes it clear that mixed motives, as in the case of Rector Mompellion, can undermine a righteous character. And Anna's faith comes under pressure at times when she is also at her most courageous, stepping in as she does to show responsibility towards various less fortunate characters, such as Maggie Cantwell and Merry Wickford. Anna's tragedy and survival combine loss and doubt, anger and love, and a great deal of common sense and openness to learning and wisdom.

Social breakdown

The pull of irrationality and fear at times of stress and loss is a powerful and confronting theme. And with it comes the ever-present capacity for violence and social breakdown, at the collective level, in the temptation of mob rule and rough justice. Mem and Anys Gowdie both meet with the projections of terrified village population unable to fathom the catastrophe and death toll.

As god-fearing people, the "faithful" can't blame God and look for human sources to explain his supposed wrath and punishment. Natural remedies and healing skills appear to be outside the orthodox and accepted ways and are interpreted as forces of witchcraft or satanism. The result is the urge to scourge and punish in the name of God's wrath, in ways that challenge the humanity of the supposedly righteous ones.

Journeys of faith and love

Michael Mompellion's story is one of high-minded dedication to God and humanity, but also contained repression, leading to his despair and loss of belief when Elinor is saved from illness but killed by Aphra in a wildly erratic and meaningless manner. His love is more about self-interest than he lets on, using Anna to quell his despair. Anna's story, on the other hand, is one of using tragedy to broaden the potential for love and service in her life.

Parallel with these narratives of personal commitment are the themes of superstition and displacement. The natural healers are rejected but, out of desperation, the unknown forces of nature are also courted in more satanic form. Social and personal vulnerability and questioning are explored in *Year of Wonders* as both positive and negative ways of searching outside religious orthodoxy for explanation and cure.

Anna looks to the human capacity for goodness and finds it deep within herself, while Mompellion loses this trust in God and people. Unlike many other characters, Anna chooses life over vengeance, with the greatest symbolic affirmation coming in saving both Lady Bradford and her baby. In her situation, mercy wins out.

Other ways, other cultures

The shape of the novel is solidly hopeful, driving events forward while the narrative glances back. And the novel also gestures beyond, as Anna's new life opens out onto the wider world and other cultures, when she flees and takes her place in a society less constrained, in some ways, by traditional male authority and narrow values. She flees to the East, to a harem and the role of healer in a non-Western society. She chooses this rich but unsexual life of service in the household of Doctor Ahmed Bey, with the rescued Bradford baby, eventually named "Aisha" (life, bread), and with her own and Michael's baby, named in Elinor's honour. Ironically, though finding herself in a harem, Anna's position at the end of the novel affirms the vital feminist sensibility throughout.

"I knew then that this was how I was meant to go on: away from death and towards life, from birth to birth, from seed to blossom, living my life amongst wonders."

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